Going viral in six easy STEPPS

By Glenn C. Altschuler

PUBLISHED IN 2000, “The Tipping Point” rapidly reached a tipping point. In the blink of an eye, it seems, Malcolm Gladwell’s argument that social epidemics are spread by a small number of special people, whom he calls mavens, connectors, and salesmen, became conventional wisdom.

According to Jonah Berger, an assistant professor of marketing at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, conventional wisdom is wrong. More important than the messenger, Berger points out, is the message. In “Contagious,” he identifies six ingredients or principles that are associated with messages, products, or ideas that go viral. Summarized in an easy-to-remember acronym (STEPPS), they are: Social Currency, Triggers, Emotion, Public, Practical Value, and Stories.

Some of Berger’s principles of social transmission are well known, even to those of us who have never sold a Girl Scout cookie. Most of us understand, for example, that emotions (more than reason) get our attention and boost sharing. We agree that observable things are more likely to be discussed and agreed upon. We also know that lots of teens were using “cutting through the clutter,” but he does not always indicate how successful the ads he cites were in doing so. Did the slogan “Each and every dining tray needs five fruits and veggies a day,” printed in different colors and fonts, and shown 20 times to college students, have a lasting impact on their eating habits? Have the bigger logos on Ralph Lauren and Lacoste shirts boosted sales? Do “I Voted” stickers increase turnout? Do the factoids placed under Snapple tray needs five fruits and veggies a day? Without calling attention to the product? More generally, do “sale prices,” which have become ubiquitous, still have the power to attract customers?

Given the ratio of failure to success in spreading the word about anything at all, the conclusion to Berger’s interesting book seems too sanguine. The best part of his framework, Berger announces, “is that anyone can use it. It doesn’t require a huge advertising budget, marketing genius, or some sort of creativity gene.” By following the STEPPS, he claims, “you can make any product or idea contagious.”

You can’t help wondering if he believes what he’s just said—or whether he’s just trying to make “Contagious” contagious.

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